

The background of the entire image is a deep blue night sky filled with stars and a faint, colorful rainbow arching across the upper half. In the lower foreground, a rustic wooden manger is shown, filled with dry straw. A piece of blue fabric is draped over the back of the manger. The manger is positioned on a dark, silhouetted landscape.

The Wonder of ADVENT

2022 ADVENT DEVOTIONS

How to use this Devotional

For Families

Spending time together reading scripture, praying, and thinking creatively is a great way to prepare for Christmas. Depending on the age of your children, you may want to consider the following:

For families with young children

Set aside some time each day to read the daily scripture together, keeping in mind the word for the day. If your children are old enough to read, have them read. Ask them what they remember or what stood out to them in the reading. Use the questions supplied or make up your own to help focus your reflection. Encourage kids to draw pictures that reflect the reading or the day's word. Please post these to the Advent Photo-A-Day Facebook page. (See below for more information about the Facebook page.) An Advent Wreath is a nice focal point and reminder of the season. If you don't have one, you can order one online or simply use four candles. At church we use three blue candles and one pink candle for Advent.

For families with junior or senior high students

Older children can do much of this on their own, but it is great to talk about this as a family and encourage them to join you in this daily devotion. Together, pick a time to touch base each day to review the daily devotion. If you find meeting daily is challenging, set aside a half hour a couple of times a week to review the daily devotions. If your daily schedule is a bit crazy, you might want to schedule a time before things get out of hand! You might want to take pictures that reflect each day's word and scripture lesson and share them with each other via e-mail or post them on your favorite social media platforms.

For individuals

Set aside the same time each day—15 to 30 minutes will give you time not only to read but to think, ponder, and pray. Do as much or as little as you find helpful. Each day there is a scripture reading, a photo, devotional thoughts, and questions. As you read, you might choose to engage in one of the following disciplines:

Meditation—Quietly focus on the daily reading, perhaps reading it over and over again.

Reflection—Use this book to help focus your thoughts, answer the questions supplied, and ask new ones!

Journaling—You might want to have a little notebook set aside for this or go paperless, and blog!

Social Media—Post photos, artwork, or poems that have been inspired by your devotional time.

Share these devotions with family or friends and use this time to prepare your hearts and minds this Advent when we, once again, prepare to celebrate the promise of God's advent among us.

Advent Photo-A-Day

Each day will have a theme word. Focus on that word and what it means devotionally. As you go throughout your day, when something reminds you of that word or evokes a response, snap a picture and share it to your favorite social media platform. Add hashtags when you post: *#(word of the day), #Advent2022, #wonderofadvent22*, and any other hashtag that says something about the Wonder of Advent.

www.facebook.com/AdventPhotoDevotional

November 27

Looking

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 3:3b-6, 17-19

The Wonder of Advent is our theme this year, it is meant to evoke the kind of surprise and awe we see in the child's eyes in our photo today. Isn't that what this time of year is to be all about? Joy and anticipation, jingle bells and familiar smells, family, friends, and all the rest? It's a nice thought and is certainly a part of what Advent is about.

However, as we start Advent by reading Habakkuk and looking at the world around us, we may genuinely wonder but in a more perplexed and disheartened kind of way. Habakkuk cries out to God about the injustice of it all. We see the same in our world, and we join our voice to this cry. Is this what Advent is all about? What are you doing, God?

The wonder of Advent, this year, and every year is that we are drawn back into and find our place in this story of

Jesus' birth and God's promise. As we pause and let this story envelop us, we are reminded that the perpetrators of violence, injustice, and hate will not endure. The wonder of Advent is being reminded that we live by faith. As we celebrate the gift of a savior born to us long ago, we also wait in joyful and active anticipation of what God will yet do.

Questions

- What is one question you have that you would really like a direct answer from God right now?
- In a world full of 'bad news' where can you be a gospel or "good news" person for somebody today?
- Do you have any advent traditions (home advent wreath, midweek worship, etc.) that you have done in the past and may need to prepare to do if you haven't yet?

Prayer

God, we rejoice in you no matter our circumstances. Stir us to action so that we may offer what we can for the life of the world, in Jesus' name. Amen





November 28

Grace

Romans 6:1-11

Welcome to Advent. Okay, it technically started yesterday, but it's still shiny and new. If you worshipped yesterday, your church may have switched all the altar linens to blue (or purple) and lit the first candle on the advent wreath, changed liturgy, or said new prayers. There's a shift into something new.

How are we to respond? Paul, writer of the book of Romans, opens today's passage by asking his readers the question "Should we continue on as we are?" And that's an important question to ask ourselves this second day of Advent as well. What does this season mean for us and how we live, especially in busy-ness of this time of year? Do the presents need to be purchased and perfectly wrapped, the tree trimmed, the holly hung for Advent to be meaningful?

No. In the middle of all the pressures we might feel, Paul offers us this call, this reminder of who we are and how we are to live – not as those who are dead under the weight of seasonal expectations, but as those who remember the promise and heart of the season, that we have been raised to newness of life by the birth, life, death and resurrection of the Christ Child, the one who came so long ago, and who we await yet today. Advent is about Christ's coming, not having the perfect gift for Great Aunt Whoever. So give yourself a little grace, and trust that you have been united to Christ, even if a few things go undone.

Questions

- What do you do during the season of Advent that helps to remind you that you are alive in Jesus Christ?
- How might you make decisions about what you do during Advent in ways that centers God's grace in your life?

Prayer

God, on this first Monday of Advent, remind us to give ourselves the grace that we need to remember that it is not what we do, but rather what Christ does this season. Make us alive in you. Amen

November 29

Faith

Hebrews 11:32-40

In this reading the role of faith in God goes from granting strength to conquering enemies, to sending God's people running for their lives. A drastic shift happens in what faith is doing. In faith, God's people are conquering and victorious, but also being killed and hiding in holes. Through faith, some have found success, while others suffered faithfully.

The writer seems to suggest that while the faith of God's people before Jesus was commendable in both of these circumstances, there was still a better faith—a faith in Jesus Christ.

Our triumphs are futile if they are not seen as victories for those Christ reached out to save. Our sufferings may

even seem petty if not seen through the eyes of Jesus. Faith in Jesus can show the world a people, and a God, who handle victory and defeat very differently than the world.

Questions

- Where have you seen God when everything in your life seemed to be #winning or #slaying it?
- Where have you seen God when you felt defeated and were just trying to stay afloat?
- How would others wonder about the role of Jesus in your life if they saw you deal differently with success and suffering?

Prayer

Glorious God, suffering Savior, and Spirit of faith, be in us and work through us. May our successes and struggles be yours. May others come to wonder about the work you are doing in us and through us, so that they too might find new life in Jesus Christ. Amen





November 30

Waiting

Matthew 24:23-35

One of my kids gifted me the book *The Joys of Getting Older*. Cute. Picture with me the beautiful cover of a fit greyed couple, all smiles, strolling on the beach. Open it up to read about the joyous rewards maturity brings, and find that every single page is ...blank! Perhaps this is a statement that there are no joys in getting older; nothing to record. Don't wait to get old! Or perhaps it is a tabula rasa with endless possibilities for our own unique joys.

When a person reaches a certain age/stage, they may spend a lot of time waiting... for doctors... for nursing home staff... for phone calls offering to extend the warranty on their car. And then they die.

The passing of a generation. With it goes all of those who actually experienced the events of their age, like

the Israelites in the wilderness, save Joshua and Caleb, or like those Jesus speaks to in Matthew 24. Some may have died before these things took place, but the event of the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus said, that would happen before his generation passed. And it did.

Advent in our generation is a time of waiting for the coming of the Son of Man. It is waiting to celebrate again Jesus' first coming, and it is waiting in joy upon his coming again. What awaits us is a continuation of the love and promise he has already baptized us in. The wonder of our waiting is that we are not really waiting at all; we're living in The Joys of Getting Life.

Questions

- What is the hardest part of waiting (for Christmas)?
- Where do you find joy in the waiting?
- In 'the wait' of your life that remains, what do you want to do/be?

Prayer

Jesus, sometimes I feel like I can't wait for church to get over! Thank God it never gets over. Amen

Eating

Ezekiel 3:1-11

As a child, I was very literal minded. Much like Amelia Bedelia, if asked to "Draw the drapes when the sun comes in," I would have taken pencil to paper and created a fine picture. Or snipped and shaped the towels into triangles and circles if requested to "change them."

In this passage from Ezekiel, the prophet is instructed to "eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and so, speak to the house of Israel." The prophet does actually eat the words and paper and they are "as sweet as honey."

The large service book that sits on the altar does not look all that appetizing to me, but the sentiment contained in between the covers is as delicious as the finest chocolate. Every week we lift our hearts to the Lord, even if they are as weighty as a boulder. Every week we wish one another "peace" although we may be feeling militant about something.

The passage goes on to instruct what to do if the sweet words are not heard by those with "hard foreheads" and

"stubborn hearts." In this case, I am more than happy to persist in sharing God's words metaphorically. I am not sure I want to experiment with forehead knocking as a persuasive action.

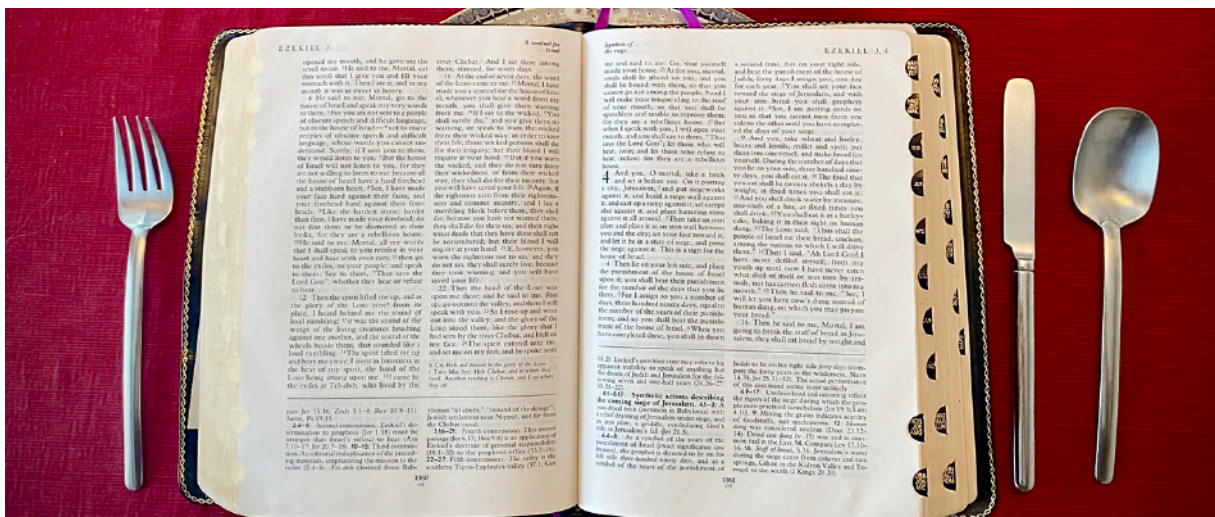
Images of what to do to compel people to hear the Word are a dime a dozen in the Bible. But as we move through Advent, anticipation of a vulnerable family and tiny savior ought to compel even the most jaded. And we are asked to open our doors to the strangers, the travelers, the forecasters—not figuratively but literally, ushering them to our table and inviting them to feast on the bread of life.

Questions

- The end of the year often brings dire predictions. How do you balance the very real troubles of the world with the promise of God's kingdom?
- Are there people who are "lost causes"? When we give up because our words fall on hardened hearts, does God give up as well?

Prayer

Delicious God, we savor your word, rolling it around our tongues. Help us share the honeyed words of hope with those who appear to have closed ears. Amen



December 2

Rebuilding

Ezra 3:8-13

I'm always struck by this reading from Ezra. The people of God have come home from exile in Babylon, and one of the things that is on the top of their to-do list now that they're back home is to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. And, here in this story, they've done it.

Now, the rebuilding of the Temple doesn't exactly inspire the same reaction in everyone. Some of the people, who had not seen the former Temple, react with joy. They shout and praise God. However, some of the people who had seen the former Temple, react with lament. They shout and weep. And our reading from Ezra tells us that the two sounds: the joy and lament, the old and the new; mingle together from a distance so that they are indistinguishable from one another.

And, for me, that's the wonder of rebuilding. The wonder of creating something new that is at the same time something old, is the way that these mingle together. The old becomes new. The new is imbued with what has come before. This Advent, we celebrate the wonder of an old story: God coming into the world in Jesus. Yet, just as every year, our celebration is new. May God grant us all that wonder in this season.



Questions

- In what new ways are you observing this season of Advent?
- What time-honored traditions are you holding on to this year?

Prayer

God of Wonder, help us in this season to honor the ancient story of your coming in new ways. Preserve us in your word, and deliver us into your future through Jesus Christ. Amen

December 3

Comfort

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people.

How many times in our lives have we cried out something similar. "Come to me, God, grant me peace. Come to me, God, grant me healing. Come to me, God, let me see hope." Comfort, O comfort my people. There are times in our lives when we are struggling and we long to be comforted. We desire a healing touch in our lives. We cry out for light in our tunnel of darkness. We know that we are not alone. From the time of Isaiah through today people are crying out for comfort.

And God is listening.

For as we hear in Isaiah, that comfort is coming. God replies to Isaiah's call saying, "A voice cries out, prepare the way, make straight a highway for God, for the Lord is coming."

Yes, the Lord is coming. Coming to you, coming to the community, coming to the world. He is coming to bring comfort, hope, and healing. He is coming because of the love that he has for you.

Questions

- What stood out in this reading for you today?
- What are areas of your life that you need comfort, hope, or forgiveness?
- How can you comfort others?

Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Fill us with your breath of peace and hope. Warm our hearts with your grace. Comfort us with your unending love. Amen



December 4

Leading

Esther 4:1-17

It may sound silly, but if you've never seen Veggie Tales' video, *Esther: The Girl Who Became Queen*, it's well worth watching. It gives a more personal view of how young, "normal" Esther is strangely thrust into unique circumstances, chosen to be the wife of the king of Persia. Esther had never seen herself as anyone special or as any kind of leader, but suddenly she was a queen to a king she hardly knew. And she was soon faced with a crisis that required her to take action in order to save her people. It would be risky for Esther to speak up, but something within this "normal" girl found the courage to stand up to save both herself and her people, becoming the leader she never expected to be at "such a time as this."

We often stand back and let the "leaders" do the leading. But Esther (both the biblical and Veggie Tales versions) shows us the importance of "normal" people standing up and leading. God has blessed us each with unique gifts and calls us to use them for building up the body of Christ and for caring for others. May you have the courage of Esther when you have "such a time as this."

Questions

- Are you comfortable calling yourself a "leader"? Why or why not?
- How do you think God is calling (or has called) you to lead in your life?
- What do you need to feel more confident about leading?

Prayer

Generous God, you give us gifts to lead and serve your people. Give us courage and inspiration at times that call for us to stand up and lead. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen



December 5

Hope

Isaiah 11:1-9

What about today's world gives you any hope? On the global stage, it appears that war, chaos, greed, and disregard for human life are the characteristics of our day. Reading through Isaiah, one does not see much of a difference. I wonder how people who try to make it through this life without the hope that Christ brings can function.

Being hope-filled does not mean that all of the circumstances of your life are good. G. K. Chesterton said, "Hope is the power of being cheerful in circumstances which we know to be desperate." Isaiah writes in desperate times, and we live in them. Good thing hope is not a stranger to the believer.

Isaiah's Messianic prophecy is filled with hope. As you read through that text, let the comfort of God surround your heart. He gave the people hope as God promised one of "wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might" (11:2) was coming. For the poor and oppressed, justice was coming. For the conflicted and exhausted, peace is ahead.

For us, we read the Gospels and see how Jesus not only lived and breathed these promises but gave a further promise. He is coming again. The wonder of Advent is the power of expectation. Not just for us, but "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (11:9). Never give up hope.



Questions

- In what ways does this text remind you of the importance of believers offering hope to a world of unbelievers?
- What are some hopeful signs in today's reading that you can relate to your life today?

Prayer

God, thank you for Isaiah's hopeful message and the reminder that everything we are facing today is not the end of the story. Thank you for hope that rises above the circumstances and fills us with expectation. Amen



December 6

Wisdom

Proverbs 8:1; 22-26

It was beautiful out the other day, so I took the opportunity to put up some Advent lights in the trees outside my home. Okay, most people would call them Christmas lights, but they are blue and white and I am a church nerd. No lights on my house, just the two trees up front. I made a 15-foot-long stick out of two boards I had in the garage and that added to my 6'6" frame and extended arms. I got some of those lights pretty far up the tall maple.

While many people put lights on their homes, I pass on this option. One reason is I don't like ladders, and I've gotten stuck on a roof more than once; another reason is I'm a big guy, and gravity likes me best, so I'm keeping my feet on the ground.

I like to call this wisdom.

Today our reading from Proverbs states that wisdom has been around for a long time. One of the first things created was, in fact, lady wisdom. We think of wisdom as having been learned through experience, and I believe this is true, but I also think that she was there all along, waiting for us to listen to her call. How often do we ignore God's call to the wonder of waiting because we are impatient or too distracted by the noise and business of the world around us?

Take some time today and listen for her voice; wisdom is calling you into the Wonder of Advent.

Questions

- Have you ever thought about wisdom as a person?
- How does it strike you that wisdom is among God's first creations?
- What wisdom can we find in just waiting in wonder?

Prayer

Lord, as we await your coming among us, may we listen for wisdom's voice and hear her call so that we might live fully into your grace and peace this day. Amen

December 7

Humanity

Psalm 8:1-9

There is a certain magic to riding public transportation. Not the quirky schedule or the jostling to try and get a seat during rush hour transit, but the fact that for those moments of the ride, you are brought face-to-face with a wide spectrum of humanity. People commuting to work. Children getting to school or to daycare. Those who have no other place to go than the bus or train where they are finding a moment of shelter and warmth. For this moment, you are here, forced to coexist with people you might not otherwise encounter, might not otherwise ever see in your daily life, all of humanity in its best—and worst—moments. The sights, the smells, the crowds, all there, immanent.

But that's the wonder of it, too. For in this space, we get to encounter so many that we might not otherwise, to share this moment of mutual experience. We are forced

to encounter others in ways we might not otherwise, to be 'mindful' of them, just as the psalmist wrote in Psalm 8 about God's relationship with humankind: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?"

We can imagine what it must have been like for Jesus, God-made-flesh, to be present amongst people in a whole new way when born into humanity, to encounter people face-to-face in that way. Jesus is coming in the flesh, to dwell among us, for face-to-face encounters, because God loves humanity so much. What a wonder.

Questions

- How do we honor the presence of God in the humanity around us?
- What would it look like to see those you encounter as a reflection of the incarnate God?

Prayer

Holy one, you took on flesh for a face-to-face encounter with us, in all our human messiness. Help us in the midst of this busy season to see the wonder of humanity in all those around us, imagining that we are encountering you in others, as we meet face to face. Amen



December 8

Devotion

Ruth 1:6-18

Naomi's move to Moab was prompted by the discovery that the Lord had consideration for God's people in that area by providing them with food. Naomi is tormented by the thought that she won't be able to provide for her daughters-in-law. Then, in a surprising twist, this foreigner begins to show the kind of love and devotion exhibited by the God of Israel. Ruth seems to make the claim that even death won't stop her from clinging to Naomi until she comes through this hard time on the other side. Naomi has lost hope in the future and yet God's love shines through unexpectedly in Ruth, who remains devoted to her.

Often we forget how devoted God is towards us by providing us with the basic things that we need. We can also lose sight of those who feel abandoned by God because of all they have lost. God has come near in Jesus Christ and continues to show us this love and devotion through unlikely people in our lives.

Questions

- When have you felt tormented by the thought that you couldn't provide for someone?
- How did God make a way forward through the devotion of someone else?
- Who needs hope so badly that you might need to devote more time for them/cling to them in love?

Prayer

Thank you, Lord God, that you remain devoted to me and continue to provide for my needs. Grant me this same love so that I might cling to those who have lost hope and need to know you haven't abandoned them. Amen



December 9

Prayer

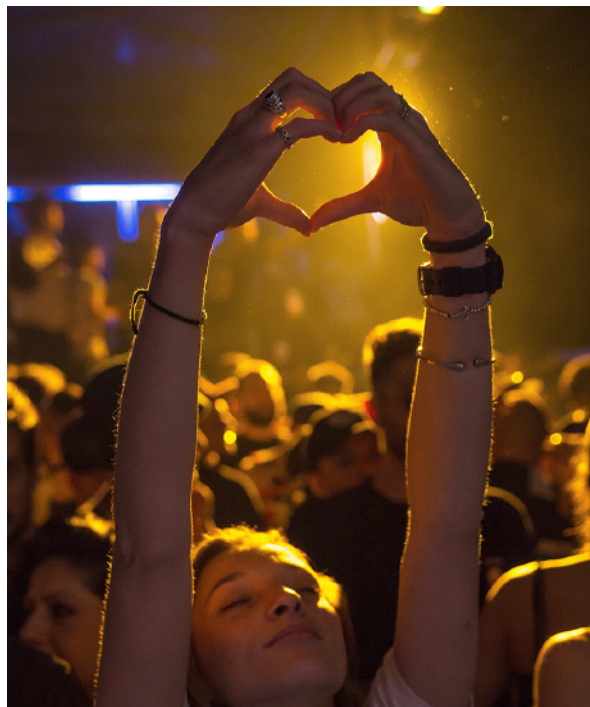
1 Samuel 2:1-8

For twenty centuries, millions of people—past and present—have prayed what Jesus taught his disciples. It comes from Jesus, so there really is no other reason needed for us to use his words to bring our hearts to God. Jesus thought it captured what was needed, and he did not keep it to himself; he shared it.

Has there ever been a prayer so meaningful to you that you made it your own, too? What are your favorite prayers? Is it one attributed to St. Francis, one you learned from family, maybe one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, or often some of my favorites: the prayers of children. Hannah's prayer was meaningful enough that it would find its place not only in the Old Testament, but also the New. This is by-and-large what Mary would sing all those centuries after Hannah, and it was still Magnificent.

If anything might bring me to prayer, giving my son up for adoption would. That is the context for both Mary and Hannah. Mary had a son thrust upon her. Hannah had prayed to bear one. And both pondered that the son was not theirs to keep. Any of our prayers like that?

Hannah's prayer does not end with verse 8, but this is a devotion produced by Lutherans, so as Martin is credited with the statement, so, too, perhaps for us: "The fewer the words, the better the prayer." Perhaps our prayers don't end where we think they do. Maybe they just begin there.



Questions

- Who could you share your favorite prayer with?
- Can prayer help us to distinguish between God's will and our own?
- How might a confession of faith (like Hannah's) also be prayer?

Prayer

Lord, listen to your children praying. Lord, send your Spirit in this place; Lord, listen to your children praying, send us love, send us pow'r, send us grace.

[Text: Ken Medema © 1973 Hope Publishing Company]

December 10

Joy

Isaiah 35:1-10

My grandparents lived in the desert, south of Tucson, Arizona. I was lucky enough to visit them during all seasons. The winter was delightful with occasional snow on the cacti. The summer more of a challenge with scorching heat but the relief of sunsets that ushered in dry cool breezes.

Deserts are great places to visit and enjoy from comfortable shaded verandas and air-conditioned homes. The desert is a very different place for refugees and immigrants, for those hoping to find a promised land.

Depending on what route the Jewish returnees took, the journey from exile to promise was 500 miles as the crow flies, straight across a blazing desert, or over 1,000 if they followed the north route, closer to water and civilization. Either way, it was a daunting journey for even the strongest.

Many of us can relate to being in the desert. Maybe we have been sick for a long time or are far from home. Maybe our resources are scarce and little help is to be found. We find ourselves with "sorrow and sighing" in our hearts and on our lips.

Isaiah 35 offers an oasis of hope and joy. At the center is the reminder from verse 4, "Your God will come... to save you." That's the message of Advent every year. And when God comes to save you, the desert will transform into a garden, and you will discover a highway home.

So we may wander and feel lost, altogether abandoned. Advent reminds us that at the end of the arduous trip lies safety and peace, so do not give up because God is not about to give up on you.

Questions

- In the age of Google and Apple maps, is there value to not always knowing where our destination may be?
- Can we know the depths of joy without first understanding the pain of despair?

Prayer

Oh God, Isaiah reminds us that, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." Help us live through the dark with confidence in the returning light.



December 11

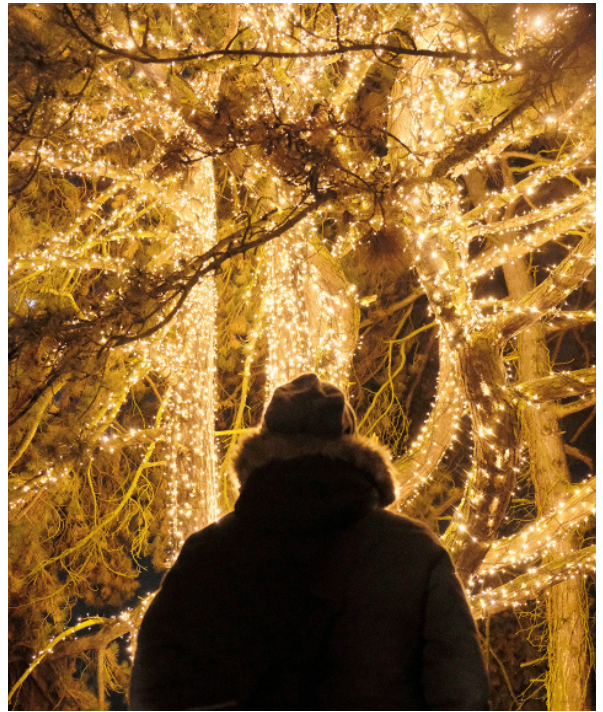
Light

Isaiah 42:1-9

What I think that I love most about this reading from Isaiah is that it comes in two parts. In the first part, God talks about the servant, whom God upholds. The servant serves with gentleness. The servant brings forth justice. The servant will not faint or grow weary. The servant will establish justice throughout the earth. We read the story of this servant, and it is likely that we think of Jesus: the coming savior and light of the world, whose birth we anticipate in this Advent season.

But, then we come to the second portion of the reading, which begins at verse five. Here, God begins talking directly to the hearer of this word: to you and to me. God tells us directly that God has called us in righteousness, that God has taken us by the hand. God tells us that we are given as a covenant to the people, that we will bring out the prisoners from the dungeon. God tells us that we are given as a covenant to the people, a light in the darkness.

Because, that's the wonder of light. To shine it, you don't actually need to produce it. Jesus is the light coming into the world. And, God has called us: the disciples of Jesus, to bring the light of Jesus into this world.



Question

- Do you find it encouraging or daunting to know that God has called you to bring the light of Jesus into the world? Why do you feel that way?

Prayer

God of Wonder, help us to be a light to all people. Bring us to all corners of the world with your love to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, our savior and lord. Amen

December 12

Promise

Isaiah 11:1-9

I have hundreds of pictures of rainbows on my phone and computer. They are one of the things that, when I am driving, I often pull over and take a picture of because I am so captured by their beauty. In seeing the rainbows I am reminded of the promises that God has made with us. Promises of peace, like the wolf living with the lamb; promises of understanding, as the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. And promise of a future with a God who loves us and fills us with his grace.

The start of our reading for today proclaims that a shoot will come out of the stump of Jesse. A new leader, a different kind of leader, is coming to us. This leader will demonstrate his love in the way he gathers and serves his disciples. It is a passage that reminds us that no matter what, God is holding onto us with the promises he made us, his beloved. And his promises of love, grace, forgiveness, and new life are promises that hold on to us when the times get tough. And if we are doubting or questioning, all we need to do is look to the sky, to the sun breaking through the dark clouds, and the rainbow shining down on us, and we are reminded—God has promised to be our God, and he always will be.



Question

- What are some of the important promises you have made in your life?
- What part of this passage speaks to you the most and why?
- How does it make you feel to hear that God is patient with you?

Prayer

Holy and Gracious God, hold onto me with your promises and remind me of all the people who have helped me to grow in my life of faith. Empower me to bless others as I have been blessed. Amen

December 13

Redemption

Isaiah 43:1-7

Do you remember a time when you had really messed up and upset your parents, a friend, or maybe a spouse? Do you remember what it felt like to hurt someone so dear to you, to see the pained look in their eye, to feel the shame inside yourself? Do you remember the consequences—realizing it was your actions that landed you in that painful place?

Then you maybe have a little idea of what the Jewish people were feeling when they were exiled in Babylon. They hated losing their homes, their land, their holy temple, but they also realized they were being exiled because of their own sins. That's a heavy burden to bear.

So these words from Isaiah had to be a balm for their wounds. Even though they deserved their exile, God went with them into exile. God still loved them and protected them. And God still promised to redeem them from their sins and their failings. God didn't leave his people to suffer—God accompanied them and continued blessing and redeeming them during their exile and afterward.

Questions

- How would you define "redemption"?
- Think of a time when someone else "redeemed" you, despite your mistakes.
- How have you redeemed others?

Prayer

Great Redeemer, we give you thanks for walking with us and saving us from our sins, our flaws, and our selfishness. Help us see and cherish your redeeming acts all around us, in Jesus' name. Amen



December 14

Memory

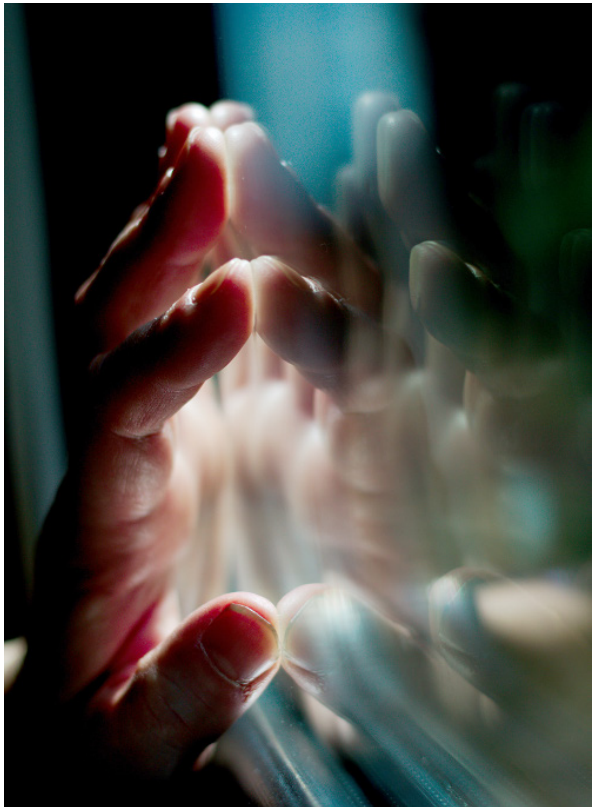
Psalm 42

We should never take memories for granted. Moving through the holidays, many reflect on the family gatherings of the past. I hope yours are warm, full of smiles and a few tears of missing those who have passed. I also know that not everyone's memories are places they want to visit.

A few years ago, my father died from complications of Alzheimer's Disease. It became such a vivid reality to realize how important memory is for living day-by-day. Although my father had little to do with me for most of my life, as his memories faded, I was able to spend time with him and even enjoy some of the time we spent together. But it faded fast.

Many people can reflect upon a relationship with God that was stronger in the past than it is now. Sometimes that's because God seems far away. With the Psalmist, we ask, "Why have you forgotten me?" We long to be close to God, but He seems distant. What would it mean if God's memories faded like my father's?

Two times in this Psalm, we are reminded to "Hope in God." I'm thankful that we read of the longing to reconnect with God, the tears and pain of being separated, the questions and wondering about God's provision. It is all a very human reality. The wonder of Advent is not really found in our surroundings but in our memories. We remember God's presence in the past. This reminds us of God's presence in the present. "I will remember," the writer says in verse 4. Let us all remember in this season of memory.



Questions

- What one person from your memories helped make you feel special?
- If your relationship with God is not as strong as it once was, what memories might call you back to a closer relationship with him today?

Prayer

Father, we sometimes feel far away from You. Would you draw us in closer? Would you use our memories to help us see clearly the path ahead? As we move through this season of Advent, would you focus our attention on the joy to come? Amen

December 15

Freedom

Galatians 3:23-29

What comes to mind for you when you hear or see the word freedom? The 4th of July, America, and apple pie? You might think of freedom of choice, religion, or the free exercise of any number of rights or maybe something like retirement!? The first thing that comes to mind for me is Mel Gibson in Braveheart as he closes his stirring speech to the Scots as William Wallace. As a child, I thought it meant I could do anything I wanted, whenever I wanted. Turns out I was wrong.

For me, the Wonder of Advent is that God in Christ was fully free to do anything, yet chooses to come among us as a powerless infant and live a fully human life, subject to all our limitations and struggles. Baptized into the fullness of who Christ is, we, too, are free not to lord it over others but to follow Jesus' example of humility, service, and grace. We are truly free when we realize it

is not about us versus them, even if we consider ourselves to be the "good guys!" There is no distinction, but there are implications.

Freedom may mean many things to many people, but in Christ, we find that freedom is ultimately transformative. As the baptized, we are all called to live into this freedom, and it changes us. No longer is it about "what's in it for me." Or "looking out for number 1." It is about the wonder of a God who comes to us in great love and sends us out so that we might share that love with all people.

Questions

- Have you ever equated freedom with Advent or Christmas? Why or why not?
- How might Paul's words disappoint? How might they bring hope?

Prayer

Gracious God, thank you for the freedom to live into my identity in Christ. May we all grow into our baptismal likeness more and more each day. Amen



December 16

Blessing

Isaiah 44:1-8

The idea of “blessing” has seen a lot of commercial use lately. Go into any big box store, or even small boutique, and you will find wall plaques, coffee cups, stickers, and photo frames all plastered with the idea of blessing: “Bless this mess!” they proclaim. “Stressed, Blessed and Coffee-obsessed!” writes another. These blessings can be bought and displayed, consumed alongside the myriad goods offered all for one low, low price.

The writer of Isaiah paints a different picture of blessing today. From assurance that God has made us in the womb to water on a thirsty land, streams flowing upon dry ground, and willows growing by the stream. Today’s reading is one that abounds with blessing.

This blessing is not limited to the reader, as the author records God’s promise, “I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.” While at this point in time, the “blessing” my offspring is most hoping for is more along the lines of a new video game, this passage in Isaiah points us towards the blessings bigger than that. Water. Trees. God’s constant presence throughout generations.

Sometimes those blessings are easy to miss. But these are the things that God promises as blessing, the things that God names as important, the things the author of Isaiah celebrates and that we can celebrate too. Use Isaiah’s list as a guide to see the full depth of God’s blessing—no trip to the store required!



Questions

- Take a journey out into nature (either in person, or virtually!) and take note of God’s blessings. What do you see? What can you recognize as a blessing in a new way? What are the blessings you pray for for future generations?

Prayer

God, sometimes we are a mess, and miss all the ways you have so richly blessed us. Remind us of all you have given in this season that doesn’t come with a price tag. Help us be mindful to nurture and protect these blessings for future generations. Amen

December 17

Thanksgiving

Psalm 100

Today's word feels like it comes almost a month too late. For years, Christmas decorations, music, and sales have encroached on November and Thanksgiving. But today in our reflection, Thanksgiving gets its revenge, as eight days out from the incarnation, we are asked to ponder not the impending pile of presents and giant inflatable Santas, but Thanksgiving instead. However, the psalmist today isn't talking about the holiday of Thanksgiving, with turkey and touchdowns, but rather a thanksgiving of joy and praise to God.

In both the business and the busy-ness of Advent – endless sales, decorations, holiday parties, special events, and to-do lists that could use a whole host of elves to help with—the idea of giving thanks is easy to lose track of. There's simply too much to do. But the words of Psalm 100 stop us in our tracks, and remind us that it is the whole world that is called to praise God, that we are God's people, and sheep of God's pasture. So maybe today we're reminded that today's reflection is not Thanksgiving infringing on Christmas, but rather thanksgiving should be the state of God's people the whole year round... and no inflatable Santa should distract from giving thanks to God for all that we have.

Questions

- What are you thankful for today?
- How can you remember to give thanks in the midst of all the business between now and Christmas?

Prayer

God, you are good. Your steadfast love endures forever, and your faithfulness reaches across generations and seasons. Help us remember to stop and give thanks to you in all seasons and places, and gladly shout your praise with joyful noise. Amen





December 18

Listening

Matthew 1:18-25

Dreams can be a powerful way to pay attention to our inner world of unnamed emotions—areas of our life where God is trying to get our attention. Sadly, we don't talk much about dreams as a church, let alone listen to our own. In the book *God is Red* by Vine Deloria Jr., he writes, "The Christian theologians have yet to attempt to understand the reality of dreams in spite of the appearance of dreams in both Old and New Testaments."

Examples of God speaking to people through dreams abound in scripture. From Abimelech to Jacob to Laban the Aramean to Joseph and even Pharaoh. It might be

worth noting that even those who might be considered enemies of God like Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, or Pilate, also paid attention to their dreams, knowing that something important was going on that could mean the difference between life or death. When Joseph listens to God through his dream, he resolves to change his mind. The salvation of the world comes not through quiet dismissal but through active listening, not by cultural tradition but by a changed heart and mind.

"My life is a listening, God's is a speaking. My salvation is to hear and respond."—Thomas Merton

Questions

- What is the last dream you can remember having?
- How can you work on listening to God by paying more attention to your dreams this week?

Prayer

Teach us, oh Lord, how to listen to you as Joseph listened to you. When we have made up our minds but you have found a better way, help us to listen and obey. Amen

December 19

Sign

Isaiah 7:10-17

Around two-and-a-half centuries had passed from the reign of King David to the reign of Ahaz, and now that promise seemed under threat from an unexpected enemy: (Syria and) Israel—in a sense, their own people. In the preceding verses we hear that the hearts of Ahaz and his people shook like a leaf; actually their fear was worse than that. What they believed to be the way of life might not last to see the new day. Where today's passage picks up, God is here, speaking to Ahaz, even imploring Ahaz to ask for what sign God could assure the House of David with.

Around two-and-a-half centuries have passed since the Declaration of Independence to the present day, and now the promise seems under threat from an unexpected enemy: our own people. With good reason many a heart shakes like a leaf. What we believe to be the way of life might not last to see the new day. Where last month's election left off, God is here, speaking to us, even imploring us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Ahaz cannot bring himself to ask. Isaiah is beside himself, "What do you mean you won't ask?!" You want to know how God is with us? You thought it would be your might? No, look to the young woman with child (Isaiah 7:14).

Are we looking for a sign from God? Ours is no different (Luke 2), and that is why we love our enemies and pray for them.

Questions

- Where did you see God today?
- Where would you like to see God intervene in our nation?
- Where might God like to see you intervene in our world?

Prayer

Lord of all, of church and kingdom, in an age of change and doubt, keep us faithful to the gospel; help us work your purpose out.

[from *God is Here!* Text: Fred Pratt Green © Hope Publishing Company]



December 20

Child

Isaiah 9:6-7

I dare you not to sing in your best choir voice, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Indeed, unto us a child is born. The peaceful prince.

The Hebrew word for peace translates "to tie up loose ends together into the whole." To bring peace is to weave together life's frayed edges, molding them back in as a part of the whole. And a child is to do this!

When Isaiah spoke of the grand weaver, he was not speaking directly about Jesus. But our thoughts go down that path. Jesus does not inoculate us against

harm or evil—nor is he immune himself—but instead he takes the fragmented pieces that result from sin and reorders them into a mosaic, a picture of imperfectly beautiful lives. Wonderful. Mighty. Everlasting.

Christmas has a way of inviting delight and disillusionment. Today your house might be full, but somebody's absence makes it feel empty. The table might be replete with food, but you feel as a barren land, incapable of even a single weed to harvest. And so we invite the Prince into our chaos to begin the process of weaving, crafting the mosaic of life, of meaning and purpose, so that we might begin the new year as whole as possible. Invite him into your mess.

Prayer

Savor every moment of every day with family, friends, and the Piece-full One. Pray for peace during your gatherings—for peace to reign/rain on this most flawed beautiful day.



December 21

Surprise

Luke 1:5-25

How do we react to surprise? That's the question that keeps rattling around in my brain as I read this passage from St. Luke's first chapter. How do we react to surprise? Well, Zechariah reacts with terror. The surprising appearance of the angel Gabriel, there in the sanctuary of the Temple with him, fills Zechariah with fear. Zechariah also reacts to surprise with incredulity. When Gabriel delivers the surprising news of his soon-to-be-born son, John—the son for which Elizabeth and Zechariah had been praying for years—he reacts with disbelief.

So, how do we react to surprise? How do we react to the good news that we hear in this season of Advent? Are we even surprised at the news that God is to be born, that the Almighty will become one of us, to share our life and free us from our sins? What surprising news is God bringing to you this Advent, and how will you react?

The wonder of surprise is, however, that it doesn't matter how we react to surprise. God will bring God's surprising future of grace and hope to birth in the world in the coming of Jesus Christ, for whom we watch and wait this season.



Questions

- What is the best surprise that has ever happened to you?
- What is the story of a surprise that was disappointing or bad?

Prayer

God of Wonder, surprise us daily with your grace. Reveal your promises to us, so that we might trust in you as we watch and wait for the birth of Jesus Christ. Amen

December 22

Wonder

Luke 1:57-66

I often wake up early, before the rest of the family, and I am able to sit and watch the sunrise in silence. It is a beautiful site and many days I am filled with a sense of wonder, amazed to see the handiwork of God in the beauty of nature.

Wonder comes to us in a variety of ways, from the wonder of nature to the wonder of birth. The wonder of relationships and the wonder of the blessings God showers upon us. Wonder is all around us.

As we near the end of Advent, we see wonder in the birth of John, wonder in the silence of his father, wonder in his name (as it is not a family name), and wonder in who John will be and what he will do. We are also reminded that the birth of another child will come soon, and this child will fill the world with blessings and wonder. The wonder of a new king. The wonder of a new relationship with God.

Questions

- What are some things that you wonder about?
- How does the birth of John fill you with wonder?

Prayer

Come to us, Holy Spirit, and fill us with a sense of wonder and awe as new things are taking place. Hold us in your arms of mercy, fill us with your love. Help us to see the new life that is coming into the world. Amen



December 23

Peace

Luke 1:67-80

If you had been rendered mute for nine months, what would be the first words that came out of your mouth? Zechariah had been a temple priest for decades and had read Scripture and had offered more offerings and prayers than he could count. He and his wife Elizabeth were faithful to God, “blamelessly living according to all the commandments.” But they weren’t quite “at peace,” having been unable to have children.

These faithful people likely believed that God could do anything, but when they learned that God was going to do an extraordinary thing through them, Zechariah was skeptical and asked for proof. So while Elizabeth had nine months to prepare for the child God had promised, God gave Zechariah nine months of muteness to contemplate the wonders of God, and to listen to the wonders of the world.

What would your first words be after such a long time of silence? Zechariah broke his silence with a profound prophecy about his newborn child and the mission he was born to fulfill—prophet of the most high, going before the Lord to prepare his way, to teach people about salvation and forgiveness. And as Zechariah’s son John pointed the light at the coming Messiah, together, they would help to guide people in the way of peace.

Questions

- How do you feel when you’re surrounded by silence? Why?
- What sort of settings and situations make you feel peaceful?
- What would need to happen for you to feel more “at peace”?

Prayer

Mighty God, you sent John as a messenger to prepare Jesus’ way. Continue to work through their words to bring about forgiveness, salvation, and peace in our world. We pray in Jesus name. Amen





December 24

Birth

Luke 2:1-14

Who wouldn't love to sit down with Joseph and Mary to ask them a hundred questions about the experience of bringing the Christ-child into this world? Even with as much information as we are given, there are so many unanswered questions. Isn't that true with almost every birth? Even today, with the gender-reveal parties and endless selfies and social media posts, there are some things that can only be experienced and not necessarily shared. The birth of a child is the perfect expression of the wonder of Advent.

Of course, Jesus was not just any child. He was the answer to generations of prayer and searching for God's answer to address the painful turn of events that sin brought into the world. A birth that brought about new birth for a dying world.

If I can't sit down with Joseph and Mary, what about those shepherds? They have a story to tell! Angels burst forth from the heavens with the best news the world has

ever heard! "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" This is God's message to the ordinary person. In our most desperate moments, we hear that peace comes from our glorious God. It begins with the birth of a child. It continues with the new birth we experience as we follow Jesus.

Birth is a new beginning. May we be renewed and filled with joy as we experience the birth of Jesus anew in our hearts every day.

Questions

- Mary, Joseph, the Innkeeper, the Shepherds, the Angels—who would you most like to speak with, and what would you ask them?
- Consider what you can do to be reminded of the beauty and promise of the birth of Christ throughout the year and not just at Christmas.

Prayer

God, with the angels, we rejoice and praise you for the birth of Jesus. What a glorious moment in the history of your world. In your knowledge, wisdom, and providence, you brought about the most wonderful plan to save the world. Thank you that it involved a baby, a human life, something with which we can identify. Thank you for knowing us so well, and giving us the new birth that gives us all a chance to begin again. Amen

December 25

Word

John 1:1-18

Merry Christmas!

While I adore the Christmas story in Luke 2, this poetic introduction from John really opens my eyes and heart to the Wonder that is Christmas. I feel if John were around today, the intro to his book would be produced like the opening scroll for the first Star Wars movie, with impressive music to boot!

The Word... not just any word... THE WORD!

With broad dynamic strokes, John paints an absolute masterpiece, "In the Beginning." How did God create the in beginning... God spoke... the word... this is not just any word... this is THE WORD! It just doesn't get more epic than that... creation, light from darkness... then the story suddenly shifts... there was a man sent from God... From the cosmic to the particular, from the macro to the micro...

THIS... this, is the wonder of Christmas.

From breathtaking power to humble dwelling, God literally pitched a tent in the middle of the lives of ordinary folks like you and me. And yet even in this simplicity, God's glory shines, not like some brilliant supernova far off in the sky, but a warm and glowing light of love and relationship. A gift of glory that shines in your heart and mine given for us and for all on this Christmas.

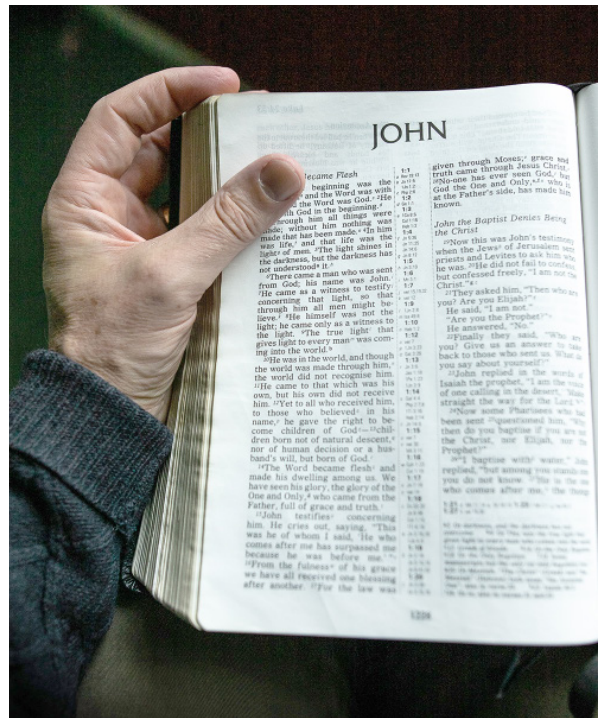
Merry Christmas, and may you share this word, this gift of God's grace and love, always.

Questions

- Do you have a particular word that is powerful for you? One that can bring light and love into a dark day?
- What does it mean for you that God comes to you this Christmas in particular? Where or how might God's kindled light shine from your heart not only on Christmas but every day?

Prayer

All-powerful and unseen God, the coming of your light into our world has brightened weary hearts with peace. Call us out of darkness, and empower us to proclaim the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen



The Wonder of ADVENT

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